

THE DISCRIMINATING AIR WAR

The Real Targets

in North Vietnam

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SOME WEEKS PASSED after my return from North Viet Nam, February 23, before the full measure and method of U.S. bombing became clear to me. The first sight of North Viet Nam's ruins clarified nothing. The individual tragedies obsessed me, as they would on any battlefield. The sum of the destruction to life and land was numbing—the results of bombing on this scale more suggestive of natural catastrophe, like plague, earthquake, or the Fall, than "limited" air war. I found it difficult to ascribe motive and pattern to the seemingly random bombing of towns and villages. So this is war, I thought. What conceivable connection can exist between these limbless victims, the straw remains of a hamlet rotting in the rain, this hospital, and the goals of American policy?

Time passes, emotions settle. The bombed sites began to fall into place. Their destruction is not accidental. "Accidents," of course, are implicit in the scope of this bombing; according to a Pentagon backgrounder of March 17, the U.S. dropped 68,000 tons of bombs on North Viet Nam in February alone, nearly 50,000 tons more than that dropped in one month on North Korea in the height of the war. If only "concrete and steel" military installations, "militarily-related" industries, along with "communications lines" accounted for the sustained intensity of this bombing, then North Viet Nam would rival Nazi Germany, or our own eastern seaboard, as a military and industrial power of the first order. Anybody who follows newspaper accounts of the bombing, with any reflection, knows full well that widely dispersed civilian targets are being bombed. That is hardly the question. Although Harrison Salisbury did not travel far and wide enough to determine consistent patterns in American bombing beyond official accounts, he did see enough in the towns of Nam Dinh, Phu Ly and Phat Diem to report that "U.S. planes are dropping an enormous weight of explosives on purely civilian targets" (*N.Y. Times*, 12/26/66).

WHAT IS IN QUESTION is the accountability of civilian bombing in North Viet Nam. Is there method behind it, and what is it? My own conclusions are rather alarming. They leave the official rationale—and even motives attributed to the air war by the opposition—so far out in left field as to leave me wondering if I am talking about the same war.

It may be helpful to trace to route by which I arrived at these conclusions, from my initial encounter with the targets themselves, to knowledge of their significance, to some overall comprehension of their role in North Vietnamese society, and hence to their selection by American bombing strategists. In Part I of this report I shall make only a quick survey of the most dramatic patterns apparent in

the air war as I saw it. More space will be given in Part II to the social and economic background of the bombing in North Viet Nam, as well as to the strategic context in which the United States is waging a highly experimental air war in Asia.

Let me begin by sketching the actual route of my investigation. As a member of the Investigating Team committed to investigate civilian bombing in North Viet Nam, my itinerary outside Hanoi was largely circumscribed by this purpose, i.e. I did not visit bombed SAM sites, railway yards, military installations. Between January 28 and February 2, I visited two district townships (or capitals), Phat Diem and Kim Son, and two villages, Kiem Truong and Tan Thanh, in Ninh Binh Province, about 80 miles south of Hanoi. During the same period in the largest province of North Viet Nam, Thanh Hoa (about forty miles further south), I investigated bombing in the capital city, in two towns, four villages and one cooperative. Between February 3 and 8, I interviewed officials at the Ministries of Public Health, Education, Water Conservancy, Defense, and Urban Affairs, for general information on the impact of the bombing on their various domestic spheres of interest. On February 9, I traveled northeast of Hanoi to the port of Haiphong, where I inspected bomb damage to suburbs of Haiphong, and later, in mining towns and a sea resort in the nearby province of Quang Ninh.

The later trip was by far the most relaxed and rich in conversations with local inhabitants due to the Tet bombing pause which set thousands of people free to stream across roads, bridges and ferries in broad daylight back to their evacuated towns. Thanh Hoa was not so gay (see "Life and Death in Thanh Hoa"), but it gave me a chance to measure reports of North Viet Nam's high morale against the reality of rural people under daily seige. (The reports are correct; in fact, it may well be Hanoi's leaders who are following the spirited lead of the young peasant militias in the countryside, rather than the reverse). In all visits, of course, I relied on interpreters, most adequate, one excellent; whenever possible with older Vietnamese I conversed directly in French. The presence of one or the other of the doctors on my team made the examination of the wounded in jungle medical stations far more valuable than it would have been without them.

NOW for the battlefield itself. The one I recall now in its totality is not exactly the one which was described to me as I visited it. From the villages to the Ministries, the Vietnamese are anxious to convey the "criminal" nature of the bombing of civilian establishments. They emphasize the human loss,

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